The Architectonics of Alienation: Antonioni's Edifice Complex

by **Frank P. Tomasulo**

Architecture is a forgotten language.
--Goethe, *The Language of Architecture*[1]

It is difficult to imagine a narrative or documentary film in which there are no buildings. In most films we simply ignore them as mere backdrop to the dramatic action or human activity. Some filmmakers, however, use architectural space more meaningfully, thereby enabling spectators to follow John Ruskin's entreaty to "read a building as we would read Milton or Dante."[2] The architectural analogue goes back to Aristotle's *tapas eidon* ("place of ideas"), Ovid, Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, and Hegel.[3] Even Freud used a city—Rome--to propose an analogy between mind and memory: "Rome is not a human habitation, but a *psychical entity* with a similarly long and copious past. .. and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one."[4] This article will address how architecture can serve as analogue, metaphor, or structuring device within the semiotic system of an entirely different art form: cinema.

No European filmmaker epitomizes the metaphorical and dialectical use of modern architecture more than does Michelangelo Antonioni. The expressive architectural spaces seen throughout the director's *oeuvre* constitute a veritable *mise-en-scène* of objective correlatives for the "alienation effect" of the modernist condition. The contemporary buildings and urban centers seen in his films go far beyond traditional setting and backdrop, even beyond analogue and anthropomorphism, by using space to objectify artistic, cultural, religious, historical, psychological, and even political discourses. For

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Antonioni, building sites are frequently the source of his cinematic inspiration. As the director himself put it, "Some filmmakers decide to tell a story and then choose the decor which suits it best. With me, it works the other way around: there's some landscape, some place where I want to shoot, and out of that I develop the themes of my films."[5] As such, place becomes a primary element in Antonioni's complex visual language, serving narrative, dramatic, and thematic functions.

In fact, the director's first two films--*Gente de Po* (1947) and *N.U.* (1948)--were documentaries about distinctive places: the former about a natural setting, the scenic Po River valley, and the latter about an urban milieu, the dirty streets of Rome. The dichotomous tensions between nature and civilization were thereby clearly articulated in the filmmaker's fledgling efforts. It might be tempting, on the basis of those two films, to conclude that Antonioni is a Romantic who yearns for a return to untrammeled Nature and/ or a Luddite who eschews the rise of the modern Megalopolis (a term coined in 1961 by the geographer Jean Gottman).[6] This "Nature, good; Civilization, bad" diagnosis has been offered by several Antonioni commentators (Seymour Chatman, Diane Borden, Ned Rifkin, Ted Perry, el al.), although it was most baldly stated by Diane Borden: "There is a tension set up between 'good' buildings and 'bad' buildings, as if moral choice resided within particular architectural styles ... The streamlined skeleton construction of modern architecture has ... a negative connotation, while the elaborate organic stylizations of the Baroque are idealized as representative of lost tradition and beauty."[7] The analysis that follows will argue that the filmmaker is more dialectical than dichotomous, more open and polysemous than closed and tendentious, and more prone to use various architectural forms to illustrate an evolutionary synchrony than to make evaluative judgments about different eras.

Whatever his message may be, Antonioni's dialectical juxtaposition of semiotically inflected structures establishes the domain of architecture--even over human *octants--as* a major transmitter of textual meaning. Architecture becomes a language, if you will, that enunciates themes of ancient vs. modern, nature vs. culture, atheism vs. Catholicism, woman vs. man, and even socialism vs. capitalism. Throughout Antonioni's cinema, figure becomes ground (and vice versa) as the filmmaker "foregrounds the background." In many instances, architecture may even be said to determine the figures' behavior. For the ancient Greeks, character was destiny; for Antonioni, architecture is destiny.

But that destiny is not an untroubled one. If "alienation" is a term frequently used in the Antonioni literature (most pejoratively by Andrew Sarris as "Antoniennui"), then "ambiguous" is surely the most used adjective to describe the director's work. In Antonioni's alienated *and* ambiguous cinema, architecture becomes a veritable heterocosm of experience (in a phenomenological sense)--both valorizing and critiquing, aestheticizing and mocking, modernism in all the arts. His characters are often the victims of a ubiquitous placelessness, without roots in a universalized urbanized society.

The filmmaker frequently depicts this modern personal and social alienation by juxtaposing contemporary structures with classical buildings or Nature. In fact, for Antonioni (and Karl Marx), alienation is nothing more than the psychological counterpart of the economic and social domination of private property and capital. And architecture is the art that is most directly affected by economic determinants because of its all-but-unrnediated relationship to property, capital, and real estate.

The very first image in *L'avventura* (1960) includes a construction site. (fig. 3) A modem high-rise apartment complex is being built near a diplomat's provincial villa, while a Baroque domed cathedral looms in the background. Figure becomes ground as the characters are subtly defined by these background structures: the diplomat is like the cathedral, old and patriarchal; Anna, his daughter, is like the apartment buildings, more transient and less substantial. In this scene, the diplomat complains about the encroachment of the *nouveau riche* dwellings on his estate.

Later in Sicily, a former palace is used as a police station and a great cathedral functions as a closed museum. These contemporary functional (or dysfunctional) uses for classical spaces demonstrate Antonioni's themes of dialectical and evolutionary change. As the old buildings (and old values) decay, they are gradually replaced by new structures (and new strictures).

L'avventura's anti-hero, Sandro, studied to be an architect but has resigned himself to drawing up

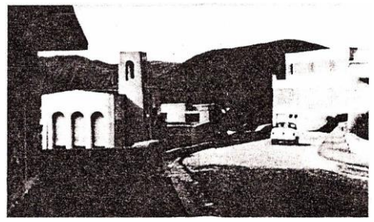


Fig. 1

estimates for other people's buildings. Like Giovanni in *La notte*, Sandro has metaphorically Closed the door on his artistic ambitions in order to become an "organization man" and to conform to business dictates. He epitomizes the crass commercialization of architecture in this century. At one point, Sandro intentionally spills ink on the sketchpad of a magnificent cathedral by a young architect--envious of the student's talent and enthusiasm. Later, Sandro closes the window shutters of that same church, eclipsing his view of an architectural achievement he is incapable of creating. In addition, the shutter closing occurs just before Sandro makes love with Claudia--suggesting that the Church's strictures against . fornication need to be blotted out of Sandro s mind as well.

In a pivotal scene, Sandro a looks out on the Baroque exuberance of Note's medieval square. (fig. 2) He begins to pontificate on the state of modern architec-

ture: "Before, buildings were made to last for centuries; now they last twenty or thirty years." Sandro follows this bleak statement about architectural longevity with a weak proposal of marriage to Claudia, The audience must draw the inference between the impermanence of modern buildings and the vagaries of modern human relationships such as marriage. In the modern epoch, even the most beautiful and impressive bourgeois buildings are disposable, capitalized for quick depreciation and planned obsolescence. In this regard they are closer to the social function of tents and encampments than to Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, or Gothic cathedrals.[8] Friedrich Engels, writing in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, was appalled that workers' housing, built by speculators for quick profit, was constructed to last for only forty years.[9] Engels little suspected that planned obsolescence would become the archetypal pattern of modern construction in bourgeois society.

Fig. 2

The near-Surrealist town near Caltanissetta, Sicily, is a latter-day ghost town, an architectural cemetery built as an experiment in "functional" Fascist architecture during World War II. (fig. 2) As a modernist exercise in city planning, the town evokes Giorgio De Chirico's metaphysical paintings. As such, it conveys a mythic resonance that propels it beyond its concrete (pun intended) place and time and transforms it into an archetype of modern life. On the interpersonal level, it acts as a microcosmic correlative for the emptiness of the human relationships portrayed in *L'avventura*, but it carries an implicit political message as well: that Fascism is inimical to human habitation. Even the blocklike church is despiritualized, part of a sterile landscape. It serves as foil to Sandro and Claudia's first love-making scene--set in a natural setting although interrupted by a chugging locomotive. Later, in Taormina, Claudia runs across an open piazza and stops at a railing. The dilapidated church and belltower behind her, in contrast to the Baroque square in Noto, suggest the deterioration of her relationship with Sandro.

Architectural forms are frequently contrasted with natural sites, as in the famous final image of the film, which dialectically juxtaposes the potentially active volcano, Mt. Etna, with the decaying facade of a luxury hotel (once a monastery). Whether or not the volcanic "breast" represents Claudia and the stony exterior wall signifies Sandro, the final shot sets up a Nature-Culture dichotomy without sublating the contradictions. Both the diegetic figures and the spectators search for a vanishing point in the asymmetrical composition, only to have the word *"Fine"* appear on screen, leaving the narratological, characterological, and thematic tensions in a state of suspended flux.

La notte (1961) begins with an elaborate downward crane shot filmed from a descending elevator on the outside of Milan's glass Pirelli Building (architect: Gio Ponti, 1961), a classic example of an International Style skyscraper. Ponti, who had worked under the Fascists, once said, "I grant and am pleased that architecture should be a means of advertising, and J recommend it to an ... I never fail to advise architects to invest in the Bank of Architecture."[10] This direct statement of the connection between architecture and capital confirms Fredric Jameson's historical observation that "the extraordinary flowering of the new postmodern architecture [was] grounded in the patronage of multinational business, whose expansion and development is strictly contemporaneous with it."[11]

It has been more than fifty years since Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson's exhibition at MOMA, but the term "International Style" (sometimes disparagingly called "glass and steel architecture") still describes that sleek, austere, but functional style of European modernism that is found all over the world. The ubiquity of the International Style seems to create a sameness, a "global village" in which one city is the same as the next, but what is really at stake is global capital, not tied to any particular city. Indeed, Milan is the most international, and hence most anonymous, of all Italian postwar boom cities. As Ned Rifkin put it, "The Pirelli Building is contemporary Italy's cathedral to its new religion--industry and wealth."[12] Thus, in Italy, corporate values supplanted Catholic dogma in the postwar era. And modern corporate architecture validated the cosmopolitan, universalistic *ethos* of multinational capitalism.

Fig. 3

The Pirelli Building's lines are clean, handsome, and even phallic--but ultimately uninviting on a human scale. (fig. 4) And the first shot of *La Notte* is a *downward* movement, a descent into the contemporary urban hell, epitomized by a lengthy traffic jam. According to Seymour Chatman, "The movement down is at once lonely and perversely beautiful. The beauty is that of pure geometry and the smooth perfection of modern materials; the loneliness issues from the lack of human relevance ... and the interminable monotony of geometric form and parallel lines."[13] The "less is more" aesthetic and simple geometric statement of the Pirelli Building remind us of Lewis Mumford's critique of Mies van der Rohe: "[He] used steel and glass to create elegant

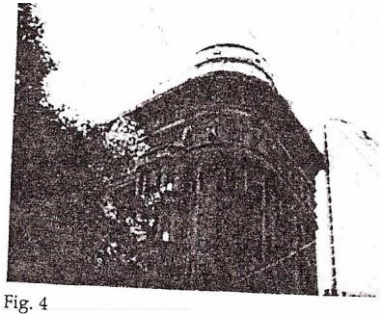


Fig. 4

Fig. 5

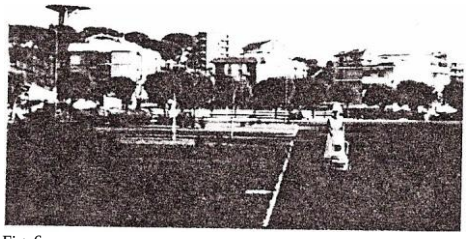


Fig. 6

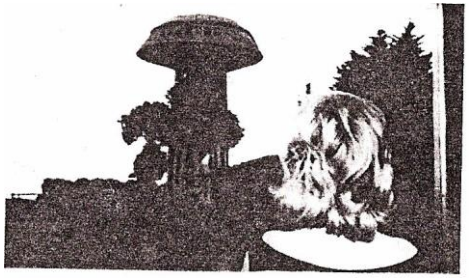


Fig. 7

monuments of nothingness. They had the dry style of machine forms without the contents."[14]

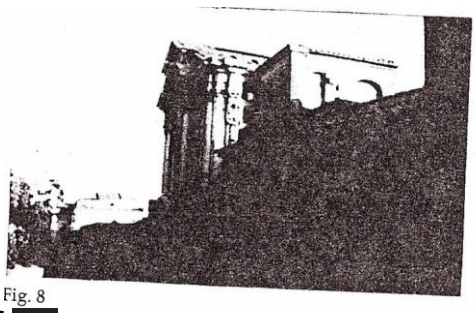
In the next scene, a modestly ornate Lombardian church is seen in the background of *several* shots. (fig. 5) The visual contrast to the Pirelli Building is obvious, but the social, religious, and economic themes are not. Through association and juxtaposition, the church is tied to the hospital and the dying humanist, Tomasso. The decorous human scale of the church represents a world view now eclipsed by Italy's miraculous headlong rush to postwar economic recovery. It must be remembered that modern architecture developed more slowly in Italy than in the rest of Europe. For one, the austerity of the early modern movements did not sit well with the more exuberant Italian artistic inheritance; for another, Italians have always exported, not imported, *culture.*

Nonetheless, Marshall Plan aid and the 1960s economic boom produced rapacious megalopolitan development of freestanding highrises and cityscapes that marked the victory of universal civilization over locally inflected culture in Italy. Lidia is often dwarfed by the facade of some new, nondescript building. Desolate and dehumanized, her psychological state is figured in the ground-conveyed by the heaviness of the structure and Antonioni's camera angle. Lidia's flowery dress injects a *small* note of naturalism and individuality in an otherwise oppressive and anonymous urban landscape. Despite the traffic jams, Nathaniel Hawthorne's phrase "paved solitude"[15] is an apt oxymoron for the isolation of the individual in the midst of a concrete megalopolis.

Claustrophobic interior space and, especially, modern furniture also create barrier images that separate and estrange characters throughout *La Notte.* Thus, the sleek and sophisticated glass and chrome facades that surround Giovanni and Lidia frequently act in concert with the repressed emotionalism on their faces to signify the stagnation of their marriage, but that sterility is also present in pseudo-natural settings like the golf course at the film's finale. At times, the architectural "plasticity" even functions contrapuntally, to contrast with the characters' inner states.

L'eclisse (1962) is also dotted with architectural motifs, particularly in the scenes in the EUR (Esposizione Universale Roma) district. (fig. 6) Designed by Marcello Piacentini, the Italian Albert Speer, this suburb, just south of Rome, was to have been the site of the 1942 World's Fair. The area we see most in *L 'eclisse*--including the prefabricated Palazzo dello Sporta (architect: Pier Luigi Nervi) and the apartments on Viale del Umanesimo (Humanism Avenue)--was constructed for the 1960 Olympic Games. The building site may represent an unfinished social arrangement that is mirrored in the incomplete relationship between Piero and Vittoria. Similarly, the pile of bricks that is part of the construction site can be seen to represent on a microcosmic level "the view of a large city, with skyscrapers and houses crowded together one on top of the other."[16]

In the opening scene, Vittoria, trying to escape the suffocating physical and emotional pressures of Riccardo's modern apartment, theatrically opens a window curtain to reveal an abstract organic piece of modern architecture, a water tower. (fig. 7) Philip Strick has said of this structure: "This alien fungoid of an architectural aberration, lurking by the house like a plume of concrete smoke, is explicit both as a phallic and an atomic symbol."[17] In addition to its sexual and nuclear connotations, the giant water tower also serves as a trope of the rapacious, domineering technique of modernist design, while at the same time conveying an organic and primitive, almost totemic, presence. This complex synthesis of motifs and ideas is made possible because this real structure unites the ultramodern and the



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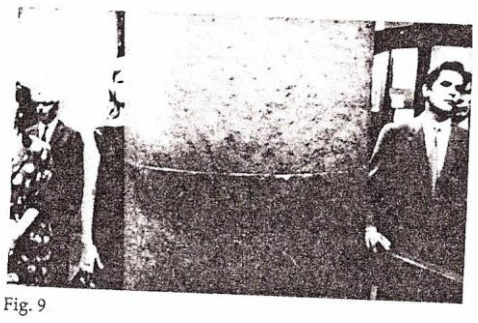

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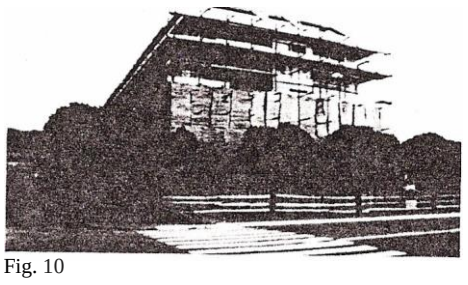


Fig. 10

Fig. 11

urhistorical.[18] It is an obvious artistic construction, yet, like a mushroom, it appears to spring up naturally from the earth, manifesting a radical modernist *eclipse* of Nature. As Jameson put it, "Heidegger's 'field path' is, after all, irredeemably and irrevocably destroyed by late capitalism, by the green revolution, by neocolonialism and the megalopolis, which runs its superhighways over the older fields and vacant lots and turns Heidegger's 'house of being into condominiums."[19] Although an *actual* structure, the water tower in *L'eclisse* is "made strange," particularly by the drawing of the curtains to reveal it, because it is detached visually from its actual context and put into an artistic context.

In the middle of the film, the ornate Roman Stock Exchange (the Borsa) functions as a temple to Mammon, god of international finance. (fig. 8) Ironically, the Borsa is located in the ancient memorial temple of Divus Hadrianum, a deified emperor Now, however, the supplicants pay homage not to the classical gods but to the "Big Board," where the random stock transactions are reported and the stockbrokers, particularly Piero, lead random, yet programmed, lives under its gaze.

In a highly significant composition, a massive pillar of the Borsa separates the male and female protagonists, shunting them to the edges of the frame like the donors in a Renaissance triptych--while cutting the *female* figure in half. (fig. 9) But these modern "donors" are not onlookers at a religious ceremony or biblical scene; instead, they are alienated from on~ another by the overwhelming physical presence of industrial capital. The characters are thus compositionally subordinated to and materially embedded In a dehumanizing milieu; furthermore, they are literally and figuratively decentered, displaced, and alienated by the economic space of the column. Here, alienation is defined in Karl Marx's terms: "Private property is the external perceptible expression of estranged human life."[20] Antonioni's Marxist critique of the Stock Market is articulated by the dynamics of the economic *mise-en-scène,* rather than via the subjective dialogue or actions of the characters. Thus, Antonioni visually makes the Marxist point (*Critique of Political Economy*) that "it is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their existence but, conversely, their social existence that determines their consciousness."[21] Indeed, Antonioni once said: "Our acts, our gestures, our words, are nothing more than the consequences of our personal situation to the world around us."[22] *L'eclisse*'s finale, a fourteen-minute coda on a building site, represents an uncompleted social arrangement, an architectural correlative for an incompleted personal relationship, the canceled rendezvous of Piero and Vittoria. Seen another way, that urban space could represent a society in transition, learning to adjust to new realities. This distinctive modern environment--the immense construction site that stretches boundlessly in every direction and forms the stage for Faust's last act--is a metonymy for *all* the constant human change of the modern age. (fig. 10) That constantly evolving social space forces the people in the foreground to change, even forces them into the background (or, in the case of *L'eclisse,* offscreen entirely).

The area gradually becomes depopulated, literally impersonal, as night falls. And the steady accumulation of shots gradually foregrounds the background, making it strange, while foregrounding the architecture at the expense of the characters or narrative. Thus, temporal succession and dialogue are elided in favor of visual *spatialization.*

II Deserto Rosso (1964) begins and ends at an industrial site, a polluted landscape of factory noise, noxious gases, and swampy cesspools. (fig. 11) But Antonioni's stylized compositions, abstract color patterns, and selective focus forge a veritable heterocosm of aesthetic beauty out of the dross of

the technological wasteland. It is well known that Antonioni painted pipes, towers, walls, and machines orange, blue, and yellow to beautify them. He also dyed apples gray to denature them and all the protagonists' hair red (the real "red desert"?). But the relationships and narrative are structured primarily through architectural motifs, in all their beauty and ugliness, rather than via character and plot.

The film's pumps, dumps, valves, pulsating smokestacks, machines, and tanks do not stand for Giuliana's feelings *per se.* The surroundings are merely there, in all their phenomenological facticity and brute reality, to exacerbate the private emotions of the main protagonist Architecture contributes to her pathology and provides the viewer with an emblem of it. It is of further interest that *Il Deserto Rosso* was filmed in Ravenna, a city famous for its Italo-Byzantine churches and mosaics, yet none of that is shown in the film. The "structuring absence" of those renowned facades highlights the structuring *presence* of the industrial landscape. Beyond Giuliana's symptoms, however, the polluting structures, as private property, act as social symptoms, tangible *indices* of the *malattia dei sentimenti* Antonioni so frequently diagnoses: "the spiritual aridity and moral coldness" (*freddezza morale*) of the postwar Italian upper classes.[23] Yet despite the character's antipathy to modem forms, Antonioni's framing displays their clean, geometric beauty, *à la* Leger. It was the Dutch painter and architect Theo Van Doesburg who claimed that "the machine is, par excellence, a phenomenon of spiritual discipline ... The new spiritual artistic sensibility of the twentieth century has not only felt the beauty of the machine, but has also taken cognizance of its unlimited expressive possibilities."[24]

Blow-Up (1966) uses the urban milieu of downtown London (seen in the very first shot of the *film)* as a *foil* for the Edenic park, the civilized natural setting that hides murder and intrigue. (fig. 12) Indeed, the sterile lines of London's *Economist* Plaza (architects: A. and P. Smithson) seen in the opening image represent the commodified space of late capitalism. According to Fredric Jameson, urban space tends to marginalize individuals and thus secures and perpetuates existing ideologies and class structures. Here, the space of capital (the *Economist* Plaza) is stripped of its Benjaminian "aura" and Marcusean "aesthetic dimension" and transformed into its surplus value. Indeed, the exchange value of such buildings-their role in the circulation of capital-is both enhanced and masked by their aesthetic appeal. The colorful, noisy, and rebellious "mimes" counterpoint the drab, silent surfaces of the affectless office buildings, yet even the Rag Week revelers remain part of the culture of surface. They are always already victims of the modem fragmentation of the subject rather than heroic revolters--even though they find an Edenic natural setting (and a civilized game, imaginary tennis) at the end of the film.

So, once again, Antonioni (mirroring Benjamin's Parisian writings) lurches between total merger of the modern self with the modem city and total alienation from it. (fig. 13) The director's aesthetic sensibility seems to attract him to the bright lights, fashion, luxury, and play of dazzling surfaces; yet his Marxist conscience sees them as decadent, hollow, and oppressive spectacles—condemned by history.[25]

The photographer's studio--all Plexiglas and modernity--contrasts sharply with his "meaningful" work--a documentary shot in a decrepit dosshouse. The slick surfaces of "mod" London's street facades—T. S. Eliot's "Unreal City"--conceal the amorality of its "cool" denizens. The tower-block housing units Thomas drives past represent a practical and economical early-1960s interpretation of Le Corbusier's "Plan Voison" and "Ville Radieuse" theories, best exemplified by London's Roehampton Estates (1959: designed by the London County Council Architects' Department).[26]

In *Zabriskie Point* (1969), the sleek office buildings and tawdry billboards of the megalopolis (Los Angeles) are sharply contrasted with the natural desert landscapes of Death Valley, yet the ravishing beauty of the desert is as empty, shallow, and lifeless as the urban milieu. Both the main characters have a similar outward beauty but are vacant inside. Mark represents both the destructive and stimulating aspects of modern urban life; Daria symbolizes the beauty and emptiness of a Romantic Eden. But the site of the dialectical sublation of Nature and Culture is the real-estate baron's modernistic desert house the corporate palazzo where the capitalists meet to rape the wilderness--to "pave Paradise and put up a parking lot." Perched on a rock formation (and seeming to spring out from it), this ersatz organic house, built in the style of Frank Lloyd

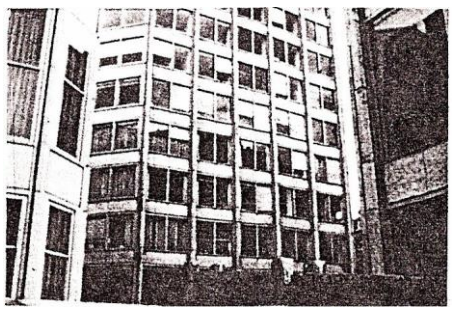
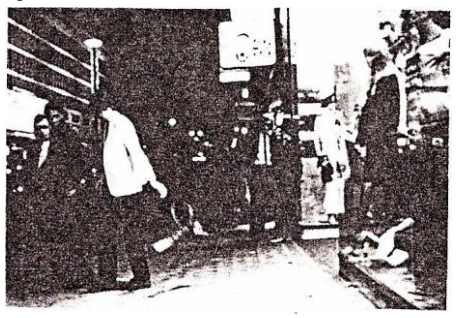


Fig. 12

Fig. 13



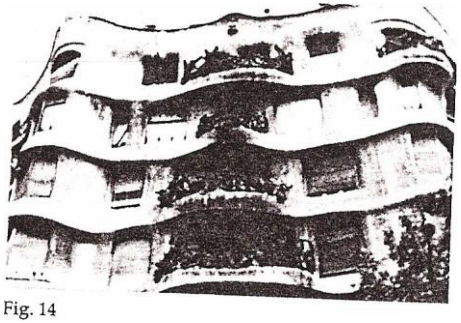
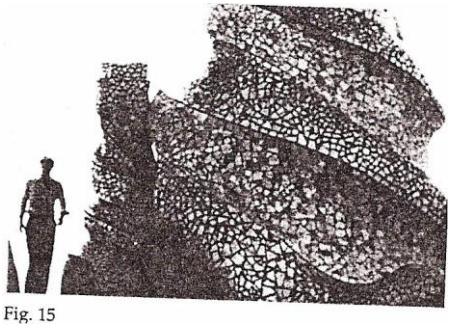


Fig. 14



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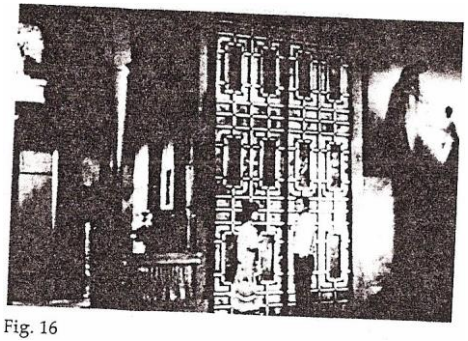

Fig. 16

Wright's Kaufman House in Bear Run, Pennsylvania (1936), contains many natural elements (a small waterfall and pool, a view of the desert), but only the rich can afford Nature, at least in this luxurious and decadent form. Daria's cathartic mental reconfiguration of the structure--the repeated slow-motion shots of the house exploding--suggests that Antonioni is promoting an imaginative revolution (a "creative desublimation," to use Marcuse's phrase) as a counterforce to capitalist alienation.

Like *Zabriskie Point*'s Death Valley, a natural wasteland is also featured prominently in *The Passenger* (1975): an African desert. But the film moves inexorably to Barcelona's Palacio Giiell (designed in 1885) and Casa Mila--also called La Pedrera--apartment houses (both conceived and built by Antoni Gaudi). (fig. 14) The use of Gaudi's phantasmagoric Art Nouveau structures (an admixture of Gothic, Baroque, and Rococo styles) and his life (Gaudi, a Romantic socialist, was run over and killed by a bus) infuses the story with multiple meanings. The undulating surfaces of the Casa Mila's walls replicate the sensuality of the unnamed Maria Schneider character, while the overall curving decorative lines and organic stylizations of Gaudi's building reflect the circular path and natural settings that Locke finds are his labyrinths of personal discovery. Antonioni seems to have finally found a modern architecture that is authentically synthetic: natural and civilized, traditional yet modern, religious yet secular, socialist yet aesthetic--the dialectical epitome of his ambiguous thematic concerns.

When Locke emerges from the bizarre chimney tower on the roof, the shifting perspectives of the architectural forms mirror the disorienting frames of self-reference that the character experiences following his identity switch. (fig. 15) The twisting, tilting chimneys and the sweep of the fence create a roller-coaster-like feeling in the long shot that also shows Locke in diminished scale.[27] The mazelike pattern, emphasized by the marble mosaic, foregrounds the character's predicament: trying to put his life together, fit in, move in a straight line, and make an attachment--but finding himself unable to achieve those goals in an asymmetrical setting. Antonioni's handheld camera accentuates Locke's plight by capturing the "movement" of the building's shimmering, mirage-like organicity.

For Locke, the Palacio Giiell is both dungeonlike *and* a refuge in which to hide, a prison and a sanctuary. Other spatial cages similarly suggest his entrapment and isolation: the cramped quarters of the small hotel rooms in Africa and Spain (the latter ironically called the Hotel de la Gloria)[28] and a shot of Locke and the Girl (an architecture student) looking out as they press up against a glass window inside a stone wall of a hotel.

When Locke returns to London, he strolls through the Bloomsbury Centre housing project and shopping mall. These new architectural forms reflect a positive renewal taking place within the character. But, typically, Antonioni also shows the old red brick buildings behind the new one, reminding us that Locke's new identity is still built on his old persona. While in London, Locke revisits his two-toned duplex. Ned Rifkin has opined that this structure signifies Locke's "divided home" (his deteriorating marriage) and "split identity."[29] When he leaves the house, an old church surrounded by scaffolding is seen behind him, an apt metaphor for Locke, whose facade is also being renovated.

Later, a Bavarian Rococo chapel in Munich both links and contrasts Gaudi's modernist forms to earlier traditions, just as Locke witnesses a marriage in the church that reminds him of permanence, tradition, and stability. (fig. 16) Architecture here functions as both motif and structuring device, promoting an experimental and imaginative form (Gaudi's plastic work) that relies on past achievements.

In *The Passenger*'s final scene, Antonioni's camera regains its own plasticity as it sweeps past the window bars of the confining hotel room into the

courtyard. The camera's movement precisely traces the graphic pattern of the Greek letter *omega* (Ω, the last letter of the alphabet), a design that exactly matches the architectural carvings on the wall of the bullring across the way. It is "the end" for Locke, for the film, and for the agonistic vision of life represented by the struggles of the bullfight. The two-dimensionality of the omega pattern on the wall contrasts with the three-dimensionality of the moving camera, suggesting that Antonioni's ultimate devotion is to cinema over architecture.

In her 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs enunciated a prophetic theme about the new urban spatial complexes.[30] Jacobs argued that modem cities were physically clean and orderly, but socially and spiritually dead. Antonioni's films articulate a congruent double vision on many levels. His work exemplifies the inherent cinematic tension between the structural use of the image as a function of the narrative and the image detaching itself from the narrative to serve purely pictorial ends. Antonioni depends for both his figural and thematic expression on elaborate and preexisting representations of the architectonic urban topography and the complex dynamics of the civil apparatus of the modem state. In Antonioni's cinema, therefore, buildings act as both "narrative signs and purely plastic relations of form."[31] For long stretches of screen time throughout his *oeuvre*, the cityscape is the true protagonist (and, occasionally, the antagonist as well).

On another level, Antonioni's cinema evinces an ambiguous double allegiance to both nature and

Fig. 17

civilization--on symbolic, dramatic, and structural levels. And, although the films both valorize and critique modernism in all the arts, architecture is a particularly privileged conveyor of spatial ambiguity. Natural settings engender nostalgic and vestigial romantic myths of a premodernist (and prelapsarian) Paradise Lost, but they are also the sites of delusion, death, and decay. The urban settings in his films reveal the beauty of the modern human condition as they simultaneously mock it. The director thus reiterates one of the defining ideas of our epoch: "the disenchantment of our culture with culture itself."[32] Karl Marx was prescient in noting that "value … does not have its description branded on its forehead. Rather, it transforms every product of labor into a *social hieroglyphic.* Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic to get behind the secret of our own *social* product, for to stamp an object of utility as a value *is just as much a social product as language*."[33] Siegfried Kracauer also used the hieroglyphic analogy: "Spatial images are the dreams of society, Wherever the hieroglyphics of any spatial image is deciphered, there the basis of social reality presents itself."[34]

In a more contemporary format, Michelangelo Antonioni also attempts to decipher the social hieroglyphics of modem architecture ... and modern cinema. His camera's materialist look at the inauthentic architectural space of bourgeois life under the matrix of late capitalism makes the visual point that people have been reduced to the status of things. (fig. 17) While depicting this harsh reality, Antonioni also aestheticizes modern architecture as a value and, at the same time, dialectically deglamorizes it as an alienated social product of capital, His films show the stark facades of our urban wastelands and suggest that those externalities are "made to measure" for our alienated, dehumanized times,

Notes

1. Quoted in Suzanne H, Crowhurst, *Explorations in the Meaning of Architecture* (Woodstock, N, Y. Gonddier Press, 1972), 2,

2. John Ruskin, "The Nature of the Gothic," in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* ed. E. T. Cook and . Alexander Wedderburn (London: Library Edition, 1902-1912), 186.

3. Ellen Eve Frank, *Literary Architecture: Essays Toward a Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979),234,296-99.

4. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents,* ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W, Norton, 1961), 17.

5. Michelle Manceaux, "In the Red Desert," *Sight and Sound* 33 (Summer 1964): 19.

6. Jean Gottman, *Megalopolis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1961).

7. Diane M. Borden, "Antonioni and Architecture," *Mise-en-Scène,* no. 2 (Spring 1980): 23.

8. Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 99.

9. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England,* trans. and ed., W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 107-11.

10. Quoted in Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture* (Garden City, N. Y: Anchor Press, 1973), 50.

11. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N. C: Duke University Press, 1991), 5.

12. Ned Rifkin, *Antonioni's Visual Language* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), 34.

13. Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni; or, the Surface of the World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 103.

14. Lewis Mumford, *The Highway and the City* (London: Seeker & Warburg, 1964), 156.

15. Quoted in Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton, N.].: Princeton University Press, 1981), xi.

16. Michelangelo Antonioni, *Sei Film* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1964), 420.

17. Philip Strick, *Antonioni,* "A Motion Monograph," *Motion,* no. 5 (March 1963): 12.

18. Joan Esposito, "Antonioni and Benjamin: Dialectical Imagery in *Eclipse,*" *Film Criticism* 9 (Fall 1984): 32.

19. Jameson, *Postmodernism,* 34-35.

20. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), 48.

21. Karl Marx, "Preface (to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*)," in *Early Writings,* trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), 425.

22. Quoted in "A Talk with Michelangelo Antonioni on His Work," in *L'Avventura* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 215.

23. Quoted in Chatman, *Antonioni*, 54.

24. Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 151-52.

25. Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 146.

26. R. Furneaux Jordan, *A Concise History. of Western Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 323.

27. Rifkin, *Antonioni's Visual Language,* 126.

28. Michael Alan Scott, "Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Passenger:* A *Film* Analysis" (Ed.D. diss., Columbia University Teachers College, 1979), 92.

29. Rifkin, *Antonioni's Visual Language*, 125.

30. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

31. Lionel Trilling, "On the Modern Element in Modern Literature," in *The Idea of the Modern,* ed. Irving Howe (New York: Horizon Press, 1967),60.

32. Sam Rohdie, *Antonioni* (London: BFT Publishing, 1990), 157.

33. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York: Modern Library, 1936), 85. (Emphasis added.)

34. Quoted in David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 109.

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